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by Dennis McDaniel

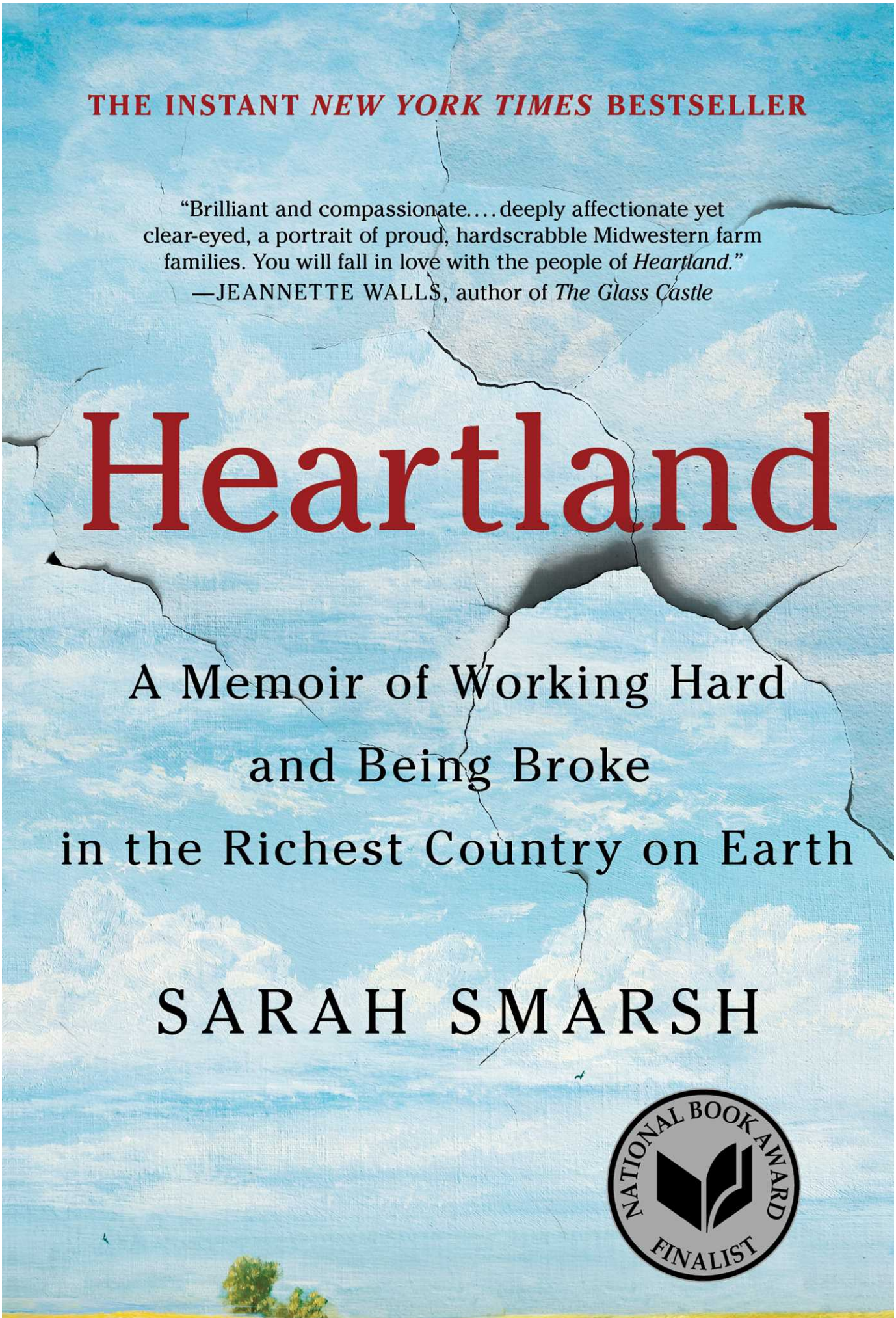
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THE INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER
"Brilliant and compassionate.... deeply affectionate yet clear-eyed, a portrait of proud, hardscrabble Midwestern farm families. You will fall in love with the people of *Heartland*."
—JEANNETTE WALLS, author of *The Glass Castle*
Heartland
A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth
SARAH SMARSH
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

HEARTLAND: A MEMOIR OF WORKING HARD AND BEING BROKE IN THE RICHEST COUNTRY ON EARTH
Sarah Smarsh
304 pages; Published by Scribner
$26.00

As the 2020 presidential election nears, analysts are still wondering about Kansas. Why did the Midwestern white working class shift to the right? Did the stated quest to shake up Washington benefit them? Since the 2016 election and the ensuing tax cuts, has the lot of this demographic improved? If not, can the Democrats win them back and, if so, how? In the run up to the 2016 election, J.D. Vance's hugely popular *Hillbilly Elegy* explained how Trump's acknowledgement of and rapport with the white working poor won him their votes. During the present election cycle, democrats would be wise to heed Sarah Smarsh's analysis in her memoir, *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth.*

Like Vance, Smarsh survived a calamitous, impoverished youth to become an academic and literary success. Similar to *Elegy, Heartland* delivers an intimate, firsthand account of Midwesterners struggling with deprivation in a country in that revels in excess.

Yet, though both Vance and Smarsh reveal poverty to be a seemingly unbreakable generational pattern, Smarsh refuses to assign blame to failed cultural values and individual indolence exacerbated by government handouts. On the contrary, the poor haven't failed America's vision; America has failed its poor. The "bootstrap" ethos inspired by the "American Dream," Smarsh argues, is a false god, a betrayal for people who toil incessantly but have nothing to show for it except debt, degradation and illness. For her struggling family of farmers, construction workers, security officers and office clerks, the American Dream appeared to be "more like a ghost haunting our way of thinking than like a sacred contract worth signing toward some future."

The American Dream cannot imagine the existence of insurmountable social class. For Smarsh's family, and other white working poor, acknowledging class stratification and seeking government assistance would be a sign of dreaded weakness. Instead, the poor worked harder, despite the physical harm caused by occupational hazards and the spiritual damage wrought by continual failure and the

disrespect from the more well-off, who felt that the white poor squandered their racial advantage. Through vivid portraits of the travails of her family tree, Smarsh reveals that the bootstrap ethos is ironically most fiercely embraced by those whom it cheats.

This betrayal is felt most acutely by prairie women, for whom work, motherhood and family promise hazard as much as fulfillment. Smarsh's memoir recounts her mother and grandmothers' struggles with unwed, teenage pregnancy, family neglect, low-paying jobs and the continual search for a home in which they and their children would be safe. To escape abuse and impending poverty, Smarsh's maternal grandmother, Betty, married six times and changed her address 48 times before Smarsh's mother began high school. Such a nomadic life prevented Betty from maintaining a steady job and forced her to rely on fairly unreliable men. And so the vicious cycle of poverty continued.



Sarah Smarsh (Courtesy of Scribner/Paul Andrews)

Betty and others of her class, devalued by deprivation and by myopic critics who saw them only as drains on public resources (indeed, establishing her "worth" — even in her mother's eyes — troubled Smarsh throughout her childhood), faced an increased threat of workplace harassment. Just as daunting as these physical threats, mental illness loomed over these women who never had the time or opportunity to develop or express their creativity. Thus, even before puberty, Smarsh saw her body as "prison," and understood that the only way to escape the poverty that afflicted her family for generations was to refuse maternity — to deny the false promise of traditional motherhood.

Paradoxically, to achieve this denial, and the personal success that it enabled, Smarsh became a mother, but on her own terms. As a lonely child, Smarsh conversed with a voice that would become the baby that she "would or would not have." It is to this imagined child, whom Smarsh names "August" after her maternal grandfather, that *Heartland* is intimately and affectionately addressed. Smarsh's relation to this voice is primarily maternal: having preserved August as only a voice rather than a physical presence, Smarsh saves this child from the "horror of being financially reliant upon a man who hits you, cheats on you, disrespects you, and generally works less than you do."

However, August also acts as a surrogate mother to the author, guiding Smarsh and giving shape to her frustration and need to escape, especially in an environment in which no one but teachers would offer hope or encouragement. By asking herself, "What would I tell my daughter to do?" Smarsh frees herself from a cycle of dependence and abuse. August becomes Smarsh's "best self" — a "corrective" and "defiance" to the undignified place that poor prairie women occupied — a fight against the manner in which the world defined her and circumscribed her possibilities. Writing her memoir to August also inspires Smarsh to share the tender and vivid recollections of a childhood, that, though deprived of the toys and organized activities that better off suburban kids enjoyed, was enriched by more simple pleasures of prairie life.

Smarsh's recreation of country life in both its beauty and its tribulation sharply departs from the romanticized (and commodified) image of "country" promoted by "conservative forces." Smarsh's family rarely used guns, practiced Catholicism and chose cars, trucks, clothes and music based on what they could afford, not on what they saw in the parking lot of a Kenny Chesney concert. Ironically, as an idea of "country" was glorified and mythologized by automobile manufacturers and

Nashville superstars, the actual country was ignored and abandoned.

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Feeling abandoned by Washington has been cited as a key reason why those who live in "flyover" country gravitated to a populist outsider with whom, at least attitudinally, they could identify. Smarsh argues that a sense of powerlessness had kept her family and others home from the polls and alienated them from Democrats, even though they offered help. Republicans, regardless of whether their policies served the farmers' interest, shared the farmers' distrust of government and strongly connected to the farmers' abiding faith in the American Dream. Such is the political dilemma of poor: they must either "concede personal failure and vote for the party more inclined to assist them, or vote for the other party, whose rhetoric conveys hope that the labor of their lives is what will compensate them."

Smarsh, too, supported the Republican agenda until she took a college sociology course and learned that social class was not a character flaw. Understanding that systemic oppressions existed beyond her or her family's capacity for hard work helped her to overcome the shame and alienation that she felt throughout her childhood. It justified the respect that she had for her mother and grandmother, despite some of their unfortunate choices, and drew her attention to the ways in which the powerful exploit the underprivileged. Attentiveness and respect combined with systemic solutions may be the formula with which Democrats can win back the trust of this underappreciated and underserved demographic.

[Dennis McDaniel is associate professor and chair of the English department at St. Vincent College.]

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